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ABSTRACT

Previous research has found that outside events seem to have little effect on happiness. Three studies in New Zealand were conducted to identify mental processes that give circumstances their favorable and unfavorable meanings. The first study examined the gap between aspiration and achievement in terms of income, education, physical fitness, leisure, and friends. As expected, most people wanted to be better off than they were. The sum of the gap between what was and what was desired predicted their unhappiness. The second study demonstrated that happy people have a stronger "Pollyannna effect" than unhappy people, i.e., they identified a larger group of positive associations in their lives. The third study found that happy people give higher pleasantness ratings across the board to a wide variety of hypothetical life events, including undesirable situations, than unhappy persons. The findings suggest that happiness should be thought about more in terms of mediating mental processes than objective life circumstances. (JAC)

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PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND LIFE EVENTS AS POOR PREDICTORS OF HAPPINESS

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Personal Circumstances and Life Events as Poor Predictors of Happiness

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William James has written, "How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is for most people at all times the secret motive of all they do and all they are willing to endure". Fortunately, in long and careful interviews going over their entire lives, most people report that they are reasonably happy, but this does not seem to reflect any widespread insight into happiness or its conditions. Happiness is much more profoundly a psychological riddle than most people suspect, and draws us step by step away from the observed circumstances of life to inner mental states.

The Definition and Perception of Happiness

The problem begins with the definition of happiness itself which can imply either objective prosperity and good fortune, or a subjective sense of well-being and pleasurable satisfaction. In some languages a single word is used for both of these "outer" and "inner" meanings so that the distinction can hardly be stated. From the time of Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, most philosophers have also been vague in stating what happiness feels like, and have included various life conditions in the definition, such as virtue, good health,

contemplation, material comfort, self-denial and so on. In popular language today people say, sometimes whimsically, that happiness "is" a warm puppy, a picnic in the park, a new business contract, a Nobel prize, or more generally, "means something different to every person".

It appears that we find it difficult to conceptualize happiness purely in terms of feelings, and fall back on external circumstances. Part of the problem here appears to be that others' feelings are "invisible" in the sense that they are not reliably expressed in observable behaviors. My basis for saying that is our repeated finding that people are largely inaccurate in judging the general happiness of close friends and housemates. We have not been able to improve this low level of accuracy by focussing on target people who affirm that their happiness is consistent and observable, nor by asking the judges to report only in terms of specific behavior patterns, nor even by combining the results of several judges. We find instead that the friends doing the judging disagree with each other, that their judgments are better correlated with their own happiness than that of the person being judged, and are over-correlated with perceptions of friendliness and popularity which can be called the "likability fallacy" (Kammann, Smith and McQueen, 1982).

Table 1 about here

The Measurement of Happiness

Before going any further, what does happiness feel like? We have examined over 400 sentences and adjectives reflecting good and bad feelings, and have reduced these, over a series of studies, to a set of 20 adjectives as shown in Table 1. These 20 adjectives reflect 10 qualities of happiness, with one good and one bad feeling for each

quality. When combined into a scale to measure the balance of good and bad feelings, they produce an internal reliability of .95, a two-week stability of .80, and load very highly on a general well-being factor. This scale also correlates well with other well-being scales, correlates at .70 with a sum of satisfaction ratings for specific areas of life, and correlates around -.70 with measures of depression, anxiety, neuroticism and somatic complaints (Kammann, Christie, Irwin and Dixon, 1979; Lichter, Haye and Kammann, 1980; Kammann, Farry and Herbison, 1982). It is our interpretation that we are measuring a basic dimension of human experience.

Objective Life Circumstances

This brings us to the crucial question--why are some people happier than others? In trying to answer this, I have adopted the tactic of asking how much variance in happiness scores can be explained by any predictive factor, or combination of factors. Although we cannot infer cause and effect from such correlations, if there is no correlation there is little chance of finding any type of causation, including circular loops under a cybernetic model. It turns out that it is very difficult to find a factor, or even a combination of factors, that can account for more than about 10% of happiness variance, that is, has a correlation above .32.

Table 2 about here

At the University of Michigan, Angus Campbell and his colleagues discovered that most objective life circumstances account for less than 5% of the variance, and even in combination do not account for more than 10% (Campbell, Converse and Rodgers, 1976). As shown in Table 2,

these factors include sex, race, education, intelligence, age, family income, type of work, place of residence, married or not, health, number of friends and physical disability. Such findings have been replicated in the U.S. (e.g., Andrews and Withey, 1976), and in New Zealand (Kammann, 1982).

There is one possible exception that I will skip over here because the data are rather complicated and inconsistent, but it is probable that unemployment for heads of household has a stronger negative impact on happiness than the other factors, but even here there is evidence that the impact also depends on cognitive interpretations. But more generally, we do not find evidence to support many popular explanations of happiness such as suburban neurosis, mid-life crisis, the privileges of wealth, the joys (or agonies) of genius, and others.

Illusory Correlations

In fact, the data on life circumstances are generally counter-intuitive. In one study we assessed the perceived correlations between happiness and various circumstances by asking adult subjects what percent of people in a given category, for example, those making over $50,000 a year, or those making less than $7,000 a year, are happy. As shown by the items underlined in Table 2 the illusory correlates of happiness were: married or not, state of health, number of friends, physical disabilities, family income, type of work, size of city, and intelligence.

It seems paradoxical that people believe that these circumstances influence happiness when they are practically uncorrelated with it in survey data, but as we have seen, the happiness of others is hard to observe accurately in everyday life. Another possibility is that we notice cases that confirm our beliefs and overlook the cases that

don't, a process that I have elsewhere called subjective validation (Marks and Kammann, 1980, Ch. 12). We had a group of adults study some short case materials in which the correlations between happiness and number of friends, health and income were all exactly zero (.00). When asked afterwards what they noticed about the happy cases many subjects reported seeing the positive correlations they expected--they erroneously said the happier cases were healthier, wealthier and had more friends than the unhappy cases (Kammann and Campbell, 1982).

Life Events

A common reaction to the poor showing of objective factors is to suggest that happiness is controlled by more personal circumstances than these broad "sociological" variables. However, we have had no better results in the study of personal life events. At first we used the Holmes and Rahe list of life events with the amendment that subjects should also rate the recalled pleasantness or unpleasantness of each event when it occurred. One of the first things we noted was that practically every event, whether it was getting married, getting divorced, having a baby, moving to a new house, getting promoted, or some other event, produced both pleasant and unpleasant feelings among different subjects. But even taking these personal reactions into account, the sum of positive life events accounted for 0% of the happiness variance, and the sum of negative events accounted for only 5%.

After replicating these findings once, we shifted to a new approach in which subjects freely nominated the three best and three worst events in their lives in the past year. After writing a paragraph on each event, the subjects rated all six events, one at a time, on some 30 rating scales. We then searched these event ratings for a set of event qualities that could predict current levels of general

happiness. The best four of these scales, involving locus of control, helping or hindering future plans, and threat, produced a multiple R of .72 and accounted for 45% of the variance after the necessary downward adjustment.

For a brief period of time it seemed we had finally broken through the 10% barrier, but it turned out to be another illusory correlation. First, we had the events paragraphs rated on the four crucial scales by six professional judges who were blind to the happiness scores. While the judges agreed superbly with each other, their event ratings did not agree well with the subjects' own ratings, and the prediction of happiness variance fell to 6%. Furthermore, when we tried to replicate the subjective usefulness of these event scales on a new group of subjects, even their own event ratings failed to account for more than 6% of the variance. Our high multiple correlation had resulted merely from giving ourselves too many opportunities to pick up chance effects (Kammann, Flett and Blackman, 1982).

Meanwhile, pursuing the strategy of using a predetermined list of life events, Zautra and colleagues, and Sarason and colleagues, also found weak results similar to ours, sometimes just a bit higher especially when predicting unhappiness on scales of purely negative affect (e.g. Block and Zautra, 1981; Sarason, Johnson & Siegel, 1981).

The most striking finding in this area is undoubtedly the demonstration by the late Philip Brickman and his colleagues that the difference between being recently crippled and confined to a wheelchair for life versus having recently won a half million dollars in a lottery is a difference that also accounts for only some 10% of the variance in current happiness scores (Brickman, Coates and Janoff-Bulman, 1978).

Intervening Mental Processes

It may seem that, by using percent of variance as the yardstick, the weakness of these relationships is exaggerated, and we should be encouraged by accounting for the first 10% of the variance in about one decade of serious effort. Furthermore, we might suppose that when methodologies are refined and all these factors, including life events, are combined into one equation, we shall own 20% of the variance. All of this may be true, but does not change my point. My reason for arguing that the glass is nine-tenths empty rather than one-tenth full is to stimulate fresh approaches to theory and research, and more philosophically to ask if these data have any implications for our cultural beliefs and preoccupations.

If we cannot adequately account for happiness on the basis of what is happening "outside" a person, it seems logical to look "inside" for mental processes that could give circumstances their favorable and unfavorable meanings. We have tried only three small studies in this direction at the University of Otago which I mention here only for the sake of illustration.

Following a lead by Angus Campbell, we looked at the gap between people's aspirations and their achievements. The achievements were defined by where they stood on five reasonably objective variables: income, education, physical fitness, leisure time, and number of close friends. The aspirations were defined by where people wanted to be on these variables "in order to be satisfied" with each one. As expected, most people wanted to be better off than they are--for example, on average they wanted a 27% larger family income. More importantly, the sum of their gaps was a modest predictor of their dissatisfactions and unhappiness. This raises the interesting possibility that along with every percentage point change in the GNP

or inflation rate reported in the newspapers, perhaps we should report the current GNAL, or gross national aspiration level.

In two other studies we were looking for an effect we call "happiness set" which refers to a cognitive bias to construe events either positively or negatively. Our first effort was simply a demonstration that happy people give higher pleasantness ratings across the board to a wide variety of hypothetical life events including undesirable ones. In the second study we followed a lead from Dember and Penwell (1980) at the University of Cincinnati and found that happy people have a stronger Pollyanna effect than unhappy people. When asked to free associate to various aspects of their lives, happy people not only retrieve a larger balance of positive associations than unhappy people, but do this even more strongly in the initial stages of the read-out. Further support for a "happiness set" arises from studies in which we have improved happiness simply by having students read positive self-statements every morning before beginning the day's activities.

These preliminary results probably do not, by themselves, add more than about 15% to the variance accounted for, but they illustrate, I think, the advantages of thinking about happiness more in terms of mediating mental processes than objective life circumstances. As correlational information begins to clarify the terrain, we can turn to longitudinal and experimental-change studies to track down the cause-effect relationships. Consequently the primary value of theory at this stage should be its ability to add new increments of variance explained at either the correlational or causational level.

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Table 1

An Adjective Scale for General Happiness

Happiness Quality	+	-
CONFLUENCE	satisfied	discontented
OPTIMISM	optimistic	hopeless
SELF ESTEEM	useful	insignificant
SELF-EFFICACY	confident	helpless
SOCIAL SUPPORT	understood	lonely
SOCIAL INTEREST	loving	withdrawn
FREEDOM	free-and-easy	tense
ENERGY	enthusiastic	depressed
CHEERFULNESS	good-natured	impatient
THOUGHT CLARITY	clear-headed	confused
	happy	unhappy